

A Herstory of Urban Babaylan

Written by Grace Caligtan, with additions by Sonya Zabala, and Ellen-Rae Cachola

Urban Babaylan was conceived during the time when the news of the Iraq War would seem inevitable in the fall of 2002. In the shadow of anthrax scares, the occupation of Afghanistan, and pending threats of using Hawai'i for military training exercises in the southern Philippines, it seemed as if the universe was asking for its best ritualists, artists, visionaries, healers and community builders to awake and redouble their efforts. While the mass mobilization across the world were saying No to War and Not in Our Name, some of us wondered, what other visions and effective actions could we publicly affirm? How would we teach our children to recognize divinity in many names, when different, so-called "others" were treated as not worthy of belonging to humanity?

The kings of Patriarchy and fundamentalism, the very same that had held sway over our ancestral islands, were rearing their heads through war and George W. double-speaking terror. The notion of surrendering and fully accepting that reality might have in earlier days, seemed like admitting defeat -- as if we were not listening to our ancestral duty to revolt against imperial oppression.

Especially when in earlier days some Urban Babaylan women with more political roots might have resisted on the streets or registered community members to vote, planning actions and crafting campaigns. Now, however, some of us have become *nanays* and caregivers, responsible to elders and young children. As a bridge between generations, self-care was a necessary strategy and thus, the attention to building internal soul strength as a natural resource became the most politically precious act for the current time. The lesson of also transitioning from maiden to mother and auntie, gave us the gift of understanding that not all victories are won through making things happen, but by energetically "holding" our immediate environment in a higher vibration of consciousness to allow miracles to emerge.

Sonya: As an activist, I have been motivated to correct injustices by my anger, by what I believe is righteous or collective indignation. It has had its place for me. It still may have its place, but it has been exhausting and I don't wind up loving myself or anyone else that much more. I am just a ball of angry fire and I think I know why, but really haven't got a clue, until I think about my mother and unconditional love. Aha. Acceptance.

In my experience it has been very rare to be in the company of intelligent, fierce, sensuous, beautiful, spiritually guided, empowered women and be accepted and loved as such.

The beckoning question behind calling Urban Babaylan into being was: how do Pinay women hold and engage our deeply personal, social, and political commitments without falling apart? There can be very high prices that one pays for "safeguarding the psychic

Equilibrium” of our communities -- especially when there are multiple layers of engagement and we are called to healing many places at once.

All over our planet, across cultures and time, women have gathered in circles under the cover of the moon, stars, and the sky. Quiet, reflective time for support and raising collective energy for positive intention restores our centers. Without the cloaking of the dark and stillness of night, revolutions could not be planned nor great escapes to freedom charted. The potential of life is embodied in the heavens and the moon, whose cycles run in our blood. It is the first woman’s calendar. Thus, in a time where so much blood is sacrificed and shed for the purpose of war rather than in the renewal of life it is appropriate that a group such as Urban Babaylan would meet under the full moon to collectively envision a new way of becoming. To do this on a monthly basis under the full moon, is to intentionally align with the rhythms of the universe that govern the ocean *danum* (water) and cycles of the menstruating body. Nanay Buwan/ Apo Bulan, or mother/grandmother moon, as we call her, seemed like the right time to gather to draw down her light.

Thus, Grace Alvaro Caligtan called the first gatherings in her Makiki home in the evenings of the full moon beginning in January 2003. Present were Darlene Rodrigues, Cindy Ramirez, Melisa Casumbal, Maile Labasan, and Gigi Miranda. The first e-mail call out invoked Aimee Suzara’s *Babaylan Rising* article and put forth an inspiring request that we as Pinays honor our longing to develop a spiritual/cultural reflective practice beyond protesting the pending Iraq war. Implicit in the message was that in the pursuit of stopping violence, we must also simultaneously create a more solid grounding and inner security based on compassionate attention and daily mindfulness of a greater vision of peace.

Other Pinays soon joined: Sonya Zabala, Cristina Valenzuela, Ellen-Rae Cachola, and JoAnna Almiron --each bringing their gifts of insight. Other beloveds and kindreds have cycled in and out as their schedules permitted and others came and never returned.

The first Nanay Buwan nights in our first year together were initially a time to meditate, ground, center and raise energy. Celebration and sharing of food was always part of the evening, along with laughter and updates of our children, partners, or prospective lovers.

Questions of politics

Three months soon after our launching, however, news spread, quickly, over coconut wireless of our efforts and soon we were asked to represent at rallies or political events. As Filipinas willing to take a stand, we entertained these opportunities and even came out to a military hearing, with a very public solidarity statement with Native Hawaiians in opposing US Military Expansion in Hawai‘i and the Philippines.

In sum, the statement opposed the US military proposal to expand its training sites to include Waikane, Kualoa, Hakipu'u and Ka'awa and its plans for jungle warfare training plans in those areas. It called for support for the Kamaka family's struggle to hold the US military accountable to properly clean up their land, and called for the return of land to its rightful ancestral stewards and descendants.

The political currency of the statement was immense. In a small island community where many can be unwilling to rock the boat, for the sake of getting along, the statement was welcomed by many Native Hawaiian activists who had longed for a collective voice from Filipinos who could make the historical link of militarization and its impact on both Hawai'i and the Philippines. Our courage was met with an invitation by Auntie Terri Keko'olani and Auntie Donnie to join with an extended '*ohana* (family) to celebrate the closing of Makahiki, marking the end of the season of Lono and the opening of the season of Ku on Makapu which is located on Kāne'ohe Marine Corp base.

While the action and resulting bridge building between babaylan and *mana wahine* (powerful women) was critical to our long term vision we realized very quickly-first and foremost, if not mindful that such public acts could drain our collective energy. Urban Babaylan was intended first and foremost as a ritual monthly space for healing, visioning, and meditation. Within the circle there were differing opinions about our future political involvement. And thus, it was decided early on, that political statements or actions could still be pursued, but not under the banner of Urban Babaylan. Some members of Urban Babaylan since that decision have made independent commitments to the following:

- Speaking out against military investment and research at the University of Hawaii through UARC
- Traveling to the Philippines and serving as the Hawai'i delegation for the East-Asia-U.S.-Puerto Rico Women's Network Against Militarism (forerunner of the International Women's Network Against Militarism) in 2004; Women's Voices Women Speak created by Terri, Gigi and Ellen upon return
- Producing the Pilipino cultural adaption of the Vagina Monologues which spotlighted the challenge of the Malaya Lolas who suffered as sexual slaves during the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines during World War II.

Undoubtedly, such public stands could have been sustained without the emotional and spiritual support of the Urban Babaylan Circle.

Decolonial Pinay (DP) began to publicly share its identity in March 21, 2012 through the creation of a facebook page. DP was started by some individuals who were part of Urban Babaylan, and others who were not. DP sought to continue some of the political work that Urban Babaylan inspired, such as publicly educating our Filipino community about issues around Hawaiian Sovereignty, Demilitarization and Political Independence, and what are Filipinos' relationships to these movements. DP has organized group attendance of talks on Hawaiian Sovereignty by Dr. Keanu Sai and Dr. Williamson Chang in April 2013; engaged in partnership with WOMen's Voices Women Speak (the group

form after the Filipina and Hawaiian Delegation to the Philippines in 2004) to engage in demilitarization actions such as a film screening in Waianae, dialogue retreat between Filipina and Kanaka Maoli women in Ka'a'awa; celebrated the publication of DP member's authorship in *Filipinas! Voices of Daughters and Descendants from the Plantation Era* and in an online news article *We Need to Ask Hard Questions About RIMPAC*; participation in Nā Hua Ea Poetry circles and Lā Ho'i Ho'i Ea. DP also organized Merienda for the Mind community dialogues with Uncle Johnny Verzon, Kamaio Ross on being Filipino in the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement; Growing Solidarity: Food Sovereignty, Farmworkers, and Organizing, Dia De Los Muertos: In Memory of Jennifer Laude at Revolution Books, in solidarity with the movement for Kollin Elderts; and a Visioning Mask Workshop with Dr. Mila Anguluan-Coger. DP members also participated in actions to provide testimony for Army Reduction at Hale Koa, Honolulu and photos of members holding signs in Wahiawa; climate change and revolutionary potential of bike riding with Atty. Anthony Oposa; ... There's so much more here: <https://dp808.weebly.com/genealogy.html>

Questions of cultural practice

While not all of Urban Babaylan women were self-identified as "political," they did crave the company of a spiritual circle, exclusively of Pilipina women. Many of the women called to Urban Babaylan were Catholic drop-outs, wanting to give up the notion of us as being repentant and sinful daughters of Eve. They wanted to claim with others their original blessing as divine beings deserving of knowledge and pleasure.

Many of these same women were also weary of the New Age alternatives out there that shamelessly appropriate indigenous traditions and commodify and invent "ancient" practices without a social mindfulness of the places and people from where these practices emerged. Such a spirituality that suffers from a lack of compassionate social responsibility can be in the words of visionary activist astrologer, Caroline Casey, "ungrounded, detached, narcissistic, or oblivious." Yet, she also warns, "Activism [particularly that strand of cultural activism which suppresses reinvented tradition in the name of authenticity] by itself is too dreary and overworked to be effective."

Such a cautionary note of both spectrums of unconscious spiritual appropriation and cultural policing is something all groups eventually are confronted with exploring. Urban Babaylan is no exception.

Sonya: On a not so recent moon, our circle gathered at China Walls, the rock wall cliffs jetting out before the south shore abundant with honu bobbing in and out of the waves. Each babaylan stood on a different uneven tier facing Nanay Buwan and we held the energy of the moon between our hands letting it wash over and careen our bodies as the waves grew stronger, the clouds grew darker and the wind picked up speed. We passed the energy through us, to our sisters and through the universe, our physical bodies one continuous spiral and fluid motion.

One sister burned the experiences of a particular circumstance that no longer served her. The flames aglow, the wind picked it right up and the negativity disappeared through the manifestation of cleansing by fire.